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### **NOAA FISHERIES GRANTS TO STUDY FOREIGN OYSTERS FOR CHESAPEAKE**

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will provide \$2 million for research into whether the introduction of an Asian oyster could be a safe answer to the woes of the Chesapeake Bay native oyster. NOAA is an agency of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

The research initiative, made of 13 separate projects, is designed to provide data necessary for an environmental impact statement now being prepared by federal and state agencies in response to a proposal by Maryland and Virginia that includes introducing the Asian oyster *Crassostrea ariakensis* to their state waters as one restoration strategy alternative.

Over the past several years, Virginia and North Carolina have been testing the non-native oyster species as a possible replacement for disease-ravaged native oysters. But the testing has been done in controlled conditions and contained settings with triploid oysters, which usually cannot reproduce. Maryland and Virginia propose to release Asian oysters capable of reproducing so the species might establish free-living populations in the Chesapeake Bay.

“Deciding to establish a new oyster in the Chesapeake Bay waters is, in the end, a management decision for the states, but we want to provide sound scientific information on which to base that decision,” said Bill Hogarth, director of NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service, which oversees the grants. “Anytime you decide to introduce a non-native species, it is a very serious matter. We want to be able to protect the Chesapeake’s ecology while we help sustain the oyster industry. But you need to have the facts first.”

More can be learned about the biology of *C. ariakensis* in its native environment or about how it could affect Chesapeake Bay’s ecology. Most ecological research currently underway on *C. ariakensis* in the Chesapeake focuses on juveniles or triploids, not reproductive oysters.

A question is whether the non-native oyster will provide the desired ecological and economic benefits for the Chesapeake Bay region, such as whether *C. ariakensis* could be a profitable product for the oyster industry. *C. ariakensis* is not commercially grown anywhere, although it has been tested in other countries such as France. It also needs to be learned if *C. ariakensis* will form oyster reefs in the Chesapeake.

The research carried out under this funding will be rapidly integrated into the decision-making process through quarterly meetings of the scientists and risk assessors involved in the environmental impact statement. This is a new model for integrating scientific information more rapidly as results are developed and undergo peer review.

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All of the projects funded by NOAA Fisheries address questions identified as essential or high priority in a National Research Council report and a Chesapeake Bay Program Scientific and Technical Advisory Committee report, both released in 2004. The research will also build on research funded by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

“NOAA’s funding will help us address remaining important questions needed to make a careful decision,” Donald F. Boesch, president of the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science, which has received several of the grants.

“Once we know more about the animal we can more fully evaluate its risks and benefits on a commercial, ecological, and biological basis,” said Mark Luckenbach, director of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science’s Eastern Shore Laboratory and an investigator on several of the grants. “Even something as simple as how *C. ariakensis* larvae swim and where they settle could be important, even as to where the watermen should look for them to harvest.”

Projects include studying long-term competitive interactions between *C. ariakensis* and the native *C. virginica* oysters, and whether *C. ariakensis* can harbor unwanted diseases. The NOAA Fisheries studies will also provide more information on the genetics, biology and ecology of the Asian oyster in its native environment, and if it is susceptible to *Bonamia*, a parasite that was recently found in North Carolina waters.

Ten academic institutions will be involved in conducting the funded research, including Rutgers University, Institute of Oceanology Chinese Academy of Sciences, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science and Virginia Institute of Marine Science.

Each year, NOAA awards approximately \$900 million in grants to members of the academic, scientific and business communities to assist the agency in fulfilling its mission to study the Earth’s natural systems to predict environmental change, manage ocean resources, protect life and property and provide decision makers with reliable scientific information. NOAA’s goals and programs reflect a commitment to these basic responsibilities of science and service to the nation for the past 34 years.

NOAA Fisheries is dedicated to protecting and preserving our nation’s living marine resources through scientific research, management, enforcement and conservation of marine mammals and other protected marine species and their habitat.

NOAA is dedicated to enhancing economic security and national safety through the prediction and research of weather and climate-related events and providing environmental stewardship of our nation’s coastal and marine resources.

On the Web:

NOAA: <http://www.noaa.gov>

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